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Iran (Islamic Republic of)

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I. HISTORY, LAND, PEOPLE, GOVERNMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

A. History, land, climate and administrative divisions

1. The first migration of Indo-European tribes or Aryans occurred about halfway through the second millennium BC. These tribes came from western and southern regions of the Siberian plateau and gradually scattered in various areas, particularly in Khorassan, Hamedan, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Fars. The Aryans, in Iran, consisted of three important tribal groupings: the Parths, who settled in Khorassan; the Medes, who chose the west; and the Persians, who established themselves in Fars. The kings of these major Aryan tribes ruled the country during different periods of Iranian history. The name "Iran" comes from the ancient word "Aryania" meaning the land of Aryans.

2. The first millennium of Iranian history witnessed the rise and fall of many dynasties. In 600 BC, Cyrus, the Achaemenid king, defeated the rival Medes and united the peoples of Iran. During Cyrus' reign the Persian army dominated a vast region of what is now the Middle East, Central Asia and Pakistan. During this period Persepolis was constructed and Pasargard in Fars became the capital. Cyrus died in 529 BC and was buried in Pasargard. Darius later became Achaemenid king and expanded the military conquests of Cyrus. The Persian Empire, which had lasted for 200 years, finally collapsed with the invasion of Alexander in the fourth century BC. The Parthians, who were of Iranian origin, ended the rule of Alexander's successors in the second century BC. They considered themselves heirs to the Achaemenid Empire and chose Zoroastrianism as the official religion. The Parthian kingdom was overthrown after 350 years by Sasanian. The Sasanid kings ruled for about 400 years until the Arab invasion of Iran.

3. The prophet Muhammad, prophet of Islam, received his divine prophetic mission in the Arabian Peninsula during the latter part of the Sasanid era. Around the seventh century AD early Muslims and disciples of the Prophet introduced Islam to Zoroastrians in Iran and invited them to join the new religion. The defeat of Sasanian brought the expansion of Islam in Iran and Muslim Arabs ruled Iran for about two centuries. With the end of Arab domination in Iran the country became the target of invaders from outside which continued for 500 years. The cities of Iran were plundered by the ruling Seljuqs, the Mongols and Tatars. After the collapse of Mongol rule, Shah Ismail Safavi took the reign of power and founded the Safavid dynasty. He succeeded in establishing a strong central authority. Under Shah Abbas I Iran prospered, trade flourished and new roads were built.

4. During Nader Shah's reign (1736-1744) Iran became a powerful military force. The military exploits of Nader Shah extended the domination of the Iranian army as far as India. After the dissolution of the Afsharid dynasty, Karim Khan Zand founded the Zand dynasty (1750-1779). After the death of Karim Khan in 1779 the Qajars took the reigns of power and ruled Iran until the end of the First World War. After the war, Reza Khan came to power and established the Pahlavi dynasty that continued till February 1979. During the Pahlavi era in Iran, tyranny, corruption, dictatorial rule and foreign interferences caused widespread public discontent which led to the revolution.

5. Finally, on 11 February, the Pahlavi regime together with the order of monarchy fell, thus opening a new chapter in Iranian history with the arrival of the period of the Islamic Revolution. The founder of the new political system and the Leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran was Imam Khomeini. After the demise of Imam Khomeini in 1989, the Assembly of Experts (comprising Islamic scholars elected by the people in accordance with the Constitution and which has the responsibility of electing the Leader) appointed Ayatollah Khamenei as the Leader. On 9 August 1989 Hojjat ul-Islam Rafsanjani was elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was re-elected President by an overwhelming majority. His term expires in July 1997.

6. Iran, covering an area of 1,648,195 square kilometres, is situated in the northern hemisphere in the south-west of Asia. Its neighbours are: Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Caspian Sea in the north, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, Turkey and Iraq in the west and the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf in the south. About 90 per cent of the Iranian land is situated within the bounds of the Iranian plateau and the country can therefore be considered as mountainous. Iran has a diverse climate. Along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea it is mild and temperate. In the western part of the country, the climate is of the Mediterranean type whereas its southern part is influenced by semi-desert conditions. The capital of Iran is Tehran and, according to the latest change of administrative divisions, Iran has 26 Ostans (provinces), 233 Shahrestan (districts) and 622 Bakhsh (townships).

B. People and population, religion, language and national groups

7. According to the 1996 census, the population of the country was 60,055,488, of which 50.24 per cent are men and 49.76 per cent women. About 61.31 per cent of the population resides in urban areas and 38.69 per cent in rural areas. The concentration of the population is 36.6 persons per square kilometre and the population growth rate is 1.47 per cent, about 99.55 per cent of the people belong to the Islamic faith, 0.17 per cent are Christians, 0.07 per cent Zoroastrians, 0.05 per cent Jews and 0.16 per cent follow other religions.

8. The very essence of Islam, like other monotheist religions, is based on the oneness of God. God is the Creator and the lord of the universe and He is all-knowing and just. God has assigned his prophets to guide people to salvation. The Shiite Imam, as the true successor of the Prophet Muhammed, has the responsibility to create a favourable atmosphere for the furtherance of moral values based on faith and righteousness and to struggle against all manifestations of corruption. It is for this reason that in this last monotheist divine religion there is no separation between the State and religion.

9. In accordance with article 4 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, military, and political laws, etc. shall be based on the Islamic standards". Article 13 recognizes the Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians as religious minorities who are free within the jurisdiction of the law to perform their religious services and may act according to their canon law as far as their personal status and religious teachings are concerned.

10. According to article 15 of the Constitution, the official language and script of Iran is Persian. Documents, official texts and textbooks shall be in this language and script. However, according to article 19, the people of Iran belonging to whatever ethnic or tribal group shall enjoy equal rights and colour of skin, race, language and the like shall not be considered as a privilege.

C. Structure of Government

11. The Constitution describes at length the political structure and cultural, social and economic institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Article 5 of the Constitution, during total absence of Hazrat Vali-Yi-Asr (Twelfth Shiite Imam) the authority to lead the people shall be an Islamic theologian, just, virtuous, abreast of the times, brave, an organizer and judicious, who assumes this responsibility on the basis of the provisions of article 107. The principle of separation of power in the three branches of Government is accepted in the political system of the country. These three branches are: legislative, executive and judiciary. The President is the chief of the executive power and is accountable to the Leader, parliament and people. The Leader is the highest religious and political authority of the country and supervises the relationship between the three branches of power. However, he is equal before the law to the other citizens of the country. Article 6 stipulates that State affairs shall be administered by officials chosen by the people, i.e. through elections: election of the President, representatives of the Majlis (Islamic Consultative Assembly), members of the councils and the like, or through a referendum. Parties, associations, political groups and trade unions and societies of recognized religious minorities as well as peaceful and unarmed demonstrations are free, provided they do not violate the principles of independence, liberty, national unity and Islamic standards and the foundation of the Islamic Republic.

12. The Majlis at present has 270 representatives elected for a term of four years. Zoroastrians, Jews, Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans, and Armenians each have one representative. All enactments of the Majlis shall be submitted to the Council of Guardians, composed of six jurists and six theologians. The Council examines them to see whether or not the enactments are in accordance with the tenets of Islam and the constitutional law. If the Council finds enactments contrary to Islamic tenets and the constitutional law, they shall be returned to the Majlis for reconsideration.

13. Article 156 of the Constitution stipulates that the judicial power is an independent power which shall protect individual as well as social rights and shall be responsible for administering justice and performing the following duties:

(a) Investigation of litigation, injustice and complaints and issuance of verdicts thereon; settlement of disputes and making decisions on those non-litigious matters to be determined by law;

(b) Restoration of public rights and promotion of justice and legal freedoms;

(c) Supervision over the proper administration of laws;

(d) Detection of wrongdoers, prosecution, punishment and chastisement of wrongdoers and administration of rulings as specified by the penal laws of Islam;

(e) Taking adequate measures to preclude wrongdoing and reform offenders.

D. Management of the economy

14. The economic system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on public, private and cooperative sectors with sound planning. The public sector includes all major industries, foreign trade, large mining enterprises, banking, insurance, supply of electrical power, dams and irrigation systems, radio, television, shipping, railway and the like which are public property and under the control of the Government. The cooperative sector includes cooperative societies for production and distribution which shall be set up in cities and rural areas according to the Islamic criteria. The private sector includes those branches of agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, trade and services which supplement economic activities of the Government and cooperative sectors.

15. The foreign trade policy has shifted its focus after the victory of the Islamic Revolution to promotion of non-oil exports. These exports have grown substantially. According to the last population census in 1996 the economically active population was 35.3 per cent of the total population. This ratio is 60.8 per cent for men and 9.1 for women. The gross national product of Iran in 1993/94 amounted to 13,400.8 billion rials.

E. Social conditions

16. Iranian society has lived in conformity with Islamic culture for the past 1,400 years in all aspects of individual and social life. Thus cultural concepts in Iranian society find their principal meaning in the context of the Islamic system. The Government and all members of the society have the primary responsibility to enhance the moral and cultural status and standard of living. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to implement the following policies and programmes in the Second Five-Year Economic, Social and Development Plan with a view to promoting moral values and strengthening the role of the family:

(a) Providing for the basic needs of society, investing in human resources, developing infrastructural assets and allocating the required resources;

(b) Increasing people's participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the nation and providing fundamental freedoms;

(c) Qualitative and quantitative cultural development, education in science and technology with special emphasis on the youth, allocation of adequate resources and expansion of social and cultural facilities;

(d) Allocation of special resources and supporting programmes for the improvement of the quality of life, in particular meeting the needs of children, women and handicapped persons;

(e) Promoting a spirit of accountability, public discipline and cooperation, and social solidarity;

(f) Promoting good individual, family and social behaviour and campaigning against undesirable patterns of behaviour;

(g) Familiarizing the youth with new science and technology along with strengthening their commitment to Islamic values.

17. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in its chapter 3 on the rights of people, declares that the dignity, lives, property, rights, homes and occupations of people shall be immune from encroachment. Every person has the right to choose, as he desires, an occupation that is not contrary to Islam and to the public interest and the rights of others. The Government shall provide all the people equally with means to secure employment and with due consideration for the need of society for different professions. All people shall have a right to benefit from social security in cases of retirement, unemployment, old age, disability, loss of means, accidents, need for health care and therapeutic services and medical care, in the form of insurance and the like. The Government shall provide all the people of the country with such services and financial assistance to be financed from the public revenue and the revenues derived from public participation. Furthermore, since every Iranian person and family is entitled to own a dwelling-place commensurate with their needs, the Government shall put the provisions of article 31 of the Constitution into effect with due consideration for priorities, especially in the case of the needy, villagers and workers.

F. Literacy and education

18. Article 30 of the Constitution obligates the Government to provide the opportunity for free education for all the people until the completion of a secondary course of studies, and higher education as far as the self-sufficiency of the country might allow. At present, of the total population of 60 million people, about 18.2 million are studying at the primary and secondary levels, with 1,024,000 in State and private institutes of higher learning. The share of State universities is 53 per cent of this number. Moreover, illiteracy has declined to 25 per cent and 96 per cent of children belonging to the 6-14 age group have access to school and education.

19. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognizes the rights of all Iranians to health and unimpeded and equal access to health care services. The underlying principles of health care programmes place priority on prevention over treatment services, encouragement and promotion of outpatient treatment instead of hospitalization, and recognition of the principles of primary health care as a fundamental element in economic and social development strategy. Bringing health services to deprived and rural areas, paying special attention to those most in need, such as mothers and children, even distribution of resources, and providing facilities are important

elements of the Government's health programmes. To this end, the Islamic Republic of Iran has taken substantial steps toward better survival of children by extension and development of primary health care. Through the existing health services delivery network in the country, the Government implements its programmes for vaccination, control of diarrhoeal diseases, and prenatal and postnatal care. The primary goal is to achieve full access of people to primary health care and services. At present about 85 per cent of rural and 60 per cent of urban populations have access to Government primary health care services and 50 per cent of the urban population have easy access to private curative health services.

20. The social security and welfare system has endorsed the concept of Health for All by the Year 2000 and at present 47.5 per cent of people are covered in line with this goal. The Islamic Republic of Iran has made successful efforts for the protection of children, women and handicapped persons, the most important of which is ensuring equal opportunities for full enjoyment of political, economic and social rights. Moreover, religious customs and traditions in Iranian society provide conducive ground for spontaneous cultural and charitable activities. In addition to Government organizations, many charitable institutions are also active in the non-governmental sector in the improvement of the cultural and economic status of needy children.